DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 408 CS 207 848

AUTHOR Myrsiades, Linda Suny
TITLE The Self-Monitoring Negative Checklist: Proposal Writing Made Manageable.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Eastern Regional Conference of the American Business Communication Association (Philadelphia, PA, April 21-22, 1983).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Check Lists; Conflict Resolution; Independent Study; Problem Solving; *Proposal Writing; Reports; *Technical Writing; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; *Outlining; Self Monitoring; *Self Monitoring Negative Checklist

ABSTRACT

With regard to proposal and report writing in particular, the Self-Monitoring Negative Checklist (SMNC) offers the potential of finished products that more completely realize the writer's objectives and serve the reader's or user's needs. Presented as a series of 31 warnings of what can go wrong in a proposal, the SMNC represents a mode of outlining that provokes the writer to think more critically and self-defensively about his or her work and to account for the reader's objections long before the reader is led to them. The SMNC assumes four critical acts in designing proposals: defining a problem, developing a methodology, establishing objectives, and justifying the study. The proposal will sell itself if it has established the researcher's credibility and if it delivers what is promised and demonstrates an understanding of the implications and applications of what has been delivered. A self-instructional mechanism, the negative checklist approach offers the benefits of being systematic and of continuously monitoring the process of proposal development. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Linda Suny Myrsiades
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Linda Suny Myrsiades
370 N. Malin Rd.
Newtown Sq., Pa. 19073

ED234408

THE SELF-MONITORING NEGATIVE CHECKLIST: PROPOSAL WRITING MADE MANAGEABLE

In any moderately large business enterprise, the time will ultimately come when a young manager or executive-in-training will have to write a complex proposal[1] or report.[2] Most managers caught in such a position will find themselves in significant ways unequal to the task. The fault, one suspects, may very well lie in the prevailing attitude that writing at any level, like the operation of a computer, is largely a question of key-punching a basic language into a system programmed to receive it. On the contrary, complex writing is a task so highly abstract and so uniquely idiosyncratic that no single use of language and certainly no programmed approach adequately describes it.

On the other hand, the written language does submit to the force of logic and is capable of being effectively organized to achieve clear objectives in a manner that is both precise and forceful.[3] With regard to proposal and report writing in particular, we must develop a structured approach to the initial steps of the writing process in order to reduce the problem studied to the point where it can be successfully treated in writing. It is this part of the writing process that this paper will address, with the intention of demonstrating

CS207848

that one particular approach, the Self-Monitoring Negative Checklist, or SMNC, offers the potential of finished products that more completely realize the writer's objectives and more completely serve the reader or user's needs.

Presented as a series of thirty-one warnings of what can go wrong in a proposal, the SMNC represents a mode of outlining that provokes the writer to think more critically and self-defensively about his work and forces him to account for the reader's objections long before the reader is led to make them. Introducing cognitive dissonance, or calculated frustration, into the proposal writing process, the SMNC assumes error on the part of the writer, thereby encouraging him to admit it early in the writing process where it is most easily corrected. In this way the effect errors have in negatively conditioning the overall design of the final report can be minimized, accounted for, and controlled.

The SMNC can also be used to work through breakdowns in the proposal process. Much like the process of reverse engineering, it forces the writer to focus on goals that have not been achieved and to ask what it takes to get there. Working backwards in an attempt to focus on what is missing, the writer is forced to account for each objection to why his goal cannot be reached. Moreover, the SMNC directs the writer to resolve conflicts, anomalies, gaps, paradoxes, and questions as it draws him away from vague generalizations

and undefined plans of action. It steers him between the two poles that represent the rock and the hard place of proposal writing: the refusal to promise what must be delivered and the failure to deliver what has been been promised.

To establish the need for a SMNC, consider the problems inherent in the following abstract of a research proposal:

> Proposal Topic: An Econometric Approach to the Allocation of Company-Sponsored (Project) Funding Within a Computer Company
>
> Historically, the allocation of company-sponsored funding has been a political, pseudo-formulated process primarily influenced by the presentational ability of the person(s) placing the projected requirements before upper management. In some periods excessive monies had been committed but not spent, impacting company profitability by requiring additional debt service for superfluous funds. Overexpenditures in other periods necessitated the company to enter into short-term market agreements, increasing debt service above fiscally acceptable levels.
>
> The purpose of this project will be to formulate a basic quantitative tool incorporating past performance of company functions and economic, money-oriented parameters to facilitate a more accurate allocation of company-sponsored funding devoid of presenter ability. Monies will be disbursed on the basis of best, most productive use in light of historical utilization of committed funds. Aberrations will be examined on a qualitative level after basic allocations have been established.
>
> Cost savings through more efficient allocation of monies is the inherent implication of this project. Committed monies will more closely mirror required funds, reducing company dependence upon short-term borrowing for over-plan expenditures and debt service on unnecessary funds.

> This project will enhance the company's financial posture by providing a more stable environment in terms of research and development funding and will enable project personnel to compete for committed monies on an equal plane. Future needs and commitments can be established through use of economic projections by unbiased sources, governmental and industrial, divorcing politics from the funding process and thus aiding both the fiscal and competitive postures of the firm.

This abstract commits several cardinal errors, chief among them the failure to state clearly its problem, that is, the situation which requires study, and a failure to make clear to the reader how the writer intends to proceed in his study and what safeguards he has incorporated to insure its reliability. Locating his problem, the author claims that "presentational ability" affects "allocation," and he has labelled that relationship a political one. What follows in the abstract seems to explain this phenomenon and is thus taken by the reader to be an extension of the problem. In fact, what follows are really two specific problem instances ("some periods" and "other periods") that illustrate another problem, "increasing debt," which is what this proposal really should be studying. "Increasing debt service" is, unfortunately, buried at the very end of the second illustration, having been appended only incidentally to the sentence.

The second paragraph, which is the closest the writer comes to discussing how he plans to proceed in his study, is hardly more accomplished. Here, the author's confused problem orientation leads him to state as his end purpose ("to formu-

ulate a tool") what is actually an implied solution, that is, a means of reaching his true end ("to eliminate increasing debt service"). One wonders, as well, whether the assumed cause ("presenter ability") of his problem is truly located, and whether the author has looked at "presenter ability" as an intervening variable or even considered other possible intervening variables. The author has failed to understand that "to facilitate a more accurate allocation" is not itself an objective, since the phrase merely describes in its first part a means to his end and in its second a criterion by means of which he can measure whether he has achieved his end. Again, is it sufficient, as the author seems to imply, to expect "a more accurate allocation" once funding is "devoid of presenter ability"? Presenter ability might, after all, be merely a contributing cause or a dirt effect obscuring a true sufficient cause (that which, once present, always produces a given result) or even a necessary cause (that which, once a result has occurred, must necessarily have been present).

In the last two sentences of the second paragraph, the author goes on to state what appear to be anticipated end results, but which, in actuality, ought to be labelled goal criteria, that by means of which the reader can measure whether the writer has successfully achieved his objectives. Benefits, introduced in the third paragraph, are left unlabelled as well, as are end results in paragraph four. The reader is, as a result,

left not only to confuse anticipated benefits with implications of the project but to ask questions about those benefits. Are they necessarily tied to each other in these connections? Has the author tested, or does he intend to test, this relationship? Or is he assuming it away?

Effective labelling would have aided the reader in the body of the abstract through such simple sub-headings as Problem, Purpose, Results to divide the abstract into its several parts and outline the researcher's presentation. Indeed, if he had been truly analytical, he might have developed a skeletal design structure prior to writing his abstract as a means of insuring that his work would include all the relevant parts, properly proportioned and not overlapping, and clearly related to the whole. An example of such a proposal could have been outlined as follows:

A PROPOSAL FOR PROJECT FUNDING

Summary

I. Introduction
   Explanation
   Background
   Prior Studies

II. Principles of Selection and Organization
   Choice of Material for Study
   Methodology

III. Particular Problems Posed

IV. Organization of the Project
   Division of Time
   Division of Responsibilities
   Schedule for Completion
   Use of Funds

V. History, Duration, and Expected Results of the Project

VI. Significance of the Task

VII. Qualifications of Participants in the Project

VIII. Bibliography or Materials List

As this example demonstrates, as complicated as proposal writing might appear to be, it can become a manageable task if we outline our approach to it. But a simple outline is just a beginning. What is really needed is a way of thinking through the problem posed by proposal writing in a systematic, detailed and, more significantly, self-motivating, way. The Self-Monitoring Negative Checklist, a mode of on-going correction of a study in progress, provides just such a means:

I. Defining the Problem
--research problem not clearly stated, poorly located, not well-understood[4]
--implications of problem not presented or unclear
--problem too narrow
--problem too broad, unmanageable focus, not outlined for study, not properly factored into its parts
--no understanding of the problem's environment or context
--problem situation not reviewed
--no separation of problem, causes, nature, effects

II. Developing a Methodology
A. Gathering Information
--literature search thin, unrepresentative range, poorly sampled[5]
--research resources unbalanced, poor quality, unrepresentative of the field, do not demonstrate knowledge of available research tools
--confusion of primary and secondary, qualitative and quantitative, or structured and unstructured data
--survey instrument, model, or statistics gathering techniques inappropriate to need, poorly constructed, biased, incomplete, unscientific, does not demonstrate knowledge of the field, does not demonstrate ability to design a survey instrument, run an experiment, or apply a model
--data inappropriate to conclusions drawn, data poor in quality or quantity, secondary, unreliable, immaterial, unverifiable, unobjective

--methodology poorly chosen, insufficient, inappropriate, poorly designed, unobjective, unexplained[6]

B. Analyzing Data
--confusion of facts, opinions, assumptions, and/or hypotheses[7]
--analysis weak, not grounded in data, unsystematic, unstructured, unable to correlate results[8]
--no sense of the whole, its constituent parts, or the interrelationship of those parts
--conceptualization weak, theoretically incomplete, not understood in application
--argument not apparent, poorly handled, incompletely connected, unconvincing
--problem-solving approach not carefully defined or sufficiently purposive
--logical fallacies, weak intellectual grasp of the problem

III. Establishing Objectives
--not explicitly stated or concrete
--not established by priority
--confused with problem, solution, or procedures
--lacking criteria for measuring successful achievement
--practical applications, future possibilities, or recommendations not provided

IV. Justifying the Study
--need to address the problem not identified or validated
--relevance and implication of study not demonstrated
--research purpose unclear, inappropriate
--research design poorly conceived, not carefully tied together, incomplete blueprint for study
--research design ideal, not concretely structured, poor guiding mechanism

The SMNC assumes four critical acts in designed proposals: defining a problem, developing a methodology, establishing objectives, and justifying the study. While this list appears to be the ideal order in which these acts should be performed in developing a proposal, they are actually mixed in practice. Nevertheless, if the writer can be made to think in terms of reducing his proposal to these four acts and of considering them in light of a checklist of skills they require, his work becomes immeasurably simplified.

The Problem

If the researcher fails to define his problem within the boundries of the SMNC, then no need for study can be said to exist. Having failed to demonstrate his understanding of the problem in specific, focused terms, the researcher may be accused of having chosen a non-problem for study or of having confused symptoms for the real problem. His protection lies first in properly factoring his problem and locating its cause, nature, and effects. But he must also establish the context for his study in other work done in the field, relating his understanding of the problem to that field and expressing the need as it is generally understood. Without such a context, he will be accused of having failed to understand not only what the literature in the field suggests about his problem but what effect prior studies have had on the framing of the problem as it must presently be studied. If the researcher is unresponsive to this process of defining his problem, the proposal reader has no guarantee that the researcher is not rehashing what has already been done or that he understands what needs to be done.

The Method

If, on the contrary, the researcher has understood his problem and has set it in the context of his field, he is already in the midst of developing a methodology. Moreover, the problem once defined will, in concert with the objectives the study must

achieve, dictate the method by means of which it can be studied. That is, whatever method is chosen must appropriately match the problem and objectives of the study. If, for example, a study needs to generate data, a survey methodology is indicated; if it needs to formulate a program, process, or product, a developmental methodology; to enact a product, an implementative methodology; to test a product, a validating methodology, and so on. Procedures, too, must be an appropriate match. An experimental design requires a description of variables, targeted subjects, control groups, and means of analyzing results. A survey design requires explanation of the instrument, conduct of the survey, sample of respondants, and method of correlating results.

In the development of a method, it is important for the researcher to understand its relation to the whole research process. A proposal, after all, represents a means of answering certain looming questions. If he has asked the requisite questions and if he can confirm his own competence to answer those questions through his research plan, he must still ask himself three more immediate questions: what data is requisite to answer those questions; where is that data to be found; and what is the most effective means of gathering and analyzing that data. Answering these questions within the boundries of the SMNC will resolve the researcher's choice of methodology.

The Objectives

Well-specified objectives serve as an expression of what a proposal intends to accomplish and as such are its driving heart. If they are universal, general, suggestive, trite, or ideal, they will encourage the reader to judge the proposal unworthy of support. Too many objectives leaves the study open to many objections. Talking around the objectives, specifying a procedure ("to conduct a survey," for example) rather than an objective, and confusion of problem, solution, and objective will all result in an ineffective proposal, for the guiding mechanism of the study will be missing, resulting in a targetless shot. The greatest danger, however, in failing to successfully establish the proposal's objectives is that the reader, unguided, is tempted to establish his own standards by means of which he will judge the proposal. Thus, the researcher must draw a map that not only leads the reader where he wants him to go but which specifies where the reader is not to go. Using the SMNC, objectives can be developed that are explicity stated, limited in number, significant, and arranged by priority. Moreover, they will be relevant and practically applicable, for they will be attended by specific criteria by means of which their successful accomplishment can be measured.

The Justification

Justification of the study appeals to the reader or user of the proposal by providing a defense of the importance of as well as the need for the study. It drives home the benefits of undertaking such a study and demonstrates its worth. Referring to authoritative testimony or significant statistics, it confirms the significance of the study, both in its own and related fields as well as in its relevance to larger problem areas. It indicates future problems that could be alleviated by the projected results of the study and future possibilities that would be made more likely by the study's successful completion.

The overall objective of a research proposal is, of course, to present a plan of action that sells itself by demonstrating the writer's credibility and technical program. Thus, the researcher is held accountable to a research design that, acting like a map and guiding the reader through the territory of the proposal, defines a certain body of material (the problem) that will be handled according to a set of procedures (the method) in order to test some idea, process, or route (the solution) to achieve a given end (the objective). The research design, then,is that which will ultimately most persuasively justify the proposal just as it must ultimately prove capable of guiding the progress of the study itself.

13-SELF-MONITORING CHECKLIST

Communicating the Proposal

The author of the proposal must, finally, be able to write that proposal in such a way that its material is reduced to an order and a sense of orderliness that will communicate his objective. The objective in writing is not, however, to solve a problem, but to persuade the reader to support the solving of that problem. Thus, the writer is in the position of organizing his material as effectively as possible to allow it to imprint his message for the highest degree of long-term commitment. To do this, the writer must first pique the curiosity of the reader; convince the reader to repose his confidence in the writer; and then lead the reader to feel he is participating in the formulation or solution of the problem being studied. Four techniques help achieve these aims: introducing the problem first in the presentation; maintaining objectivity and being information-oriented in approach; stressing the benefits of solving the problem; and keeping the proposal sufficiently open-ended that the mechanism for solving the problem is itself detailed and specific, while the solution is merely posed as a hypothesis to be tested without giving away what the project will, in fact, reveal.

Summary

In sum, the proposal will sell itself if it has established the researcher's credibility and the validity of his technical demonstration. If it delivers what is promised and demonstrates an understanding of the implications and applications of what has been delivered, then the proposal will be judged a success. One means of arriving at such success has been demonstrated in this paper. A self-instructional mechanism, the negative checklist approach, offers the benefits of being systematic and of continuously monitoring the process of proposal development. It reduces a complex task to a simple and orderly procedure that preserves a sense of the whole, its parts, and the relationship of those parts as it progressively integrates individual items into one complete process that is capable of accounting for successful proposal development.

NOTES

1

For a comprehensive bibliography of periodical literature on proposal writing, see Sarojini Balachandran, Technical Writing: A Bibliography, American Business Communication Association and the Society for Technical Communication, 1977. See also, Robert M. Carter, ed., Communication in Organizations: An Annotated Bibliography and Sourcebook (Detroit: Gale Research, 1972). Also of interest are the following: Howard P. Alvir, "A Detailed Sample of the Minute Analysis and Planning That Precedes the Final Draft for a Research Grant," ERIC Clearinghouse, No. ED 115 753, 1975; Alvir, "A Systematic Approach to Proposal Writing," ERIC Clearinghouse, No. ED 123 655, 1976; John H. Behling, Guidelines for Preparing the Research Proposal (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1978); Eric Burgess, Proposal Preparation (Alhambra, Calif.: Tinnon-Brown Publ. Co., 1969); Robert Lefferts, Getting a Grant: How to Write Successful Grant Proposals (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978); Lawrence F. Locke and Waneen Wyrick Spirduso, Proposals That Work: A Guide for Planning Research (New York: Columbia Univ. Teacher's College Press, 1976); Donald C. Orlich and Patricia Rend Orlich, The Art of Writing Successful Research and Development Proposals (Pleasantville, N.Y.: Redgrave Publ. Co., 1977; Herman Holtz and Terry Schmidt, The Winning Proposal,..How to Write it (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).

2

The following recommended works on report-writing were chosen for their relation to the material presented in this paper: Jessamon Dawe, Writing Business and Economics Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, and Co., 1978); J.C.Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson, Designing Technical Reports: Writing for Audiences in Organizations (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc, 1976). Also of use is Jack Harold Janis, The Business Research Paper: A Manual of Standards Including Bibliographical Sources for Reports, Theses, Dissertations (New York: Hobbs, Dorman, 1967); Raymond Rogers, How To Report Research and Development Findings to Management (New York: Pilot Books, 1973);

Judson Monroe, Effective Research and Report Writing in Government (New York: McGraw-Hill. 1980).

3

See here the following: Robert L. Oaks, Communication by Objective (New York: Groupwork Today, 1977); Roy W. Poe and R. T. Fruehling, Business Communications: A Problem-Solving Approach (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978); Monroe C. Beardsley, Writing With Reason: Logic for Composition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976); Beardsley, Thinking Straight: Principles of Reasoning for Readers and Writers, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

4

See for works on business research the following: Howard R. Bowen, The Business Enterprise as a Subject for Research, Social Science Research Council, 1955; John W. Buckley, Marlene H. Buckley, and Hung-Fu Chiang, Research Methodology and Business Decisions (New York: NAA, 1976); Robert Ferber and P.J.Verdoorn, Research Methods in Economics and Business (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Robert G. Murdick, Business Research: Concepts and Practice (Scranton, Pa.: International Textbook Co., 1969); J. Francis Rummel and Wesley C. Ballaine, Research Methodology in Business (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

5

See Edwin Truman Coman, Sources of Business Information, rev. ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1964); Lorna M. Daniells, Business Information Sources (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1976); H. Webster Johnson, How to Use the Business Library With Sources of Business Information, 4th ed. (Cincinnati: South-western Publ. Co., 1972); D. Maltha, Technical Literature Search and the Written Report, trans. J.C. Rigg (New York: Elsevier, 1976); Paul Wasserman, Encyclopedia of Business Information Sources (Detroit: Gale Research, 1970).

6

On methodology, see Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (Chicago: Aldine Publ. Co., 1967); A.N.Oppenheim, Questionaire Design and Attitude Measurement (New York: Basic Books, 1966); Morris Rosenberg, The Logic of Survey Analysis (New York: Basic Books, 1968); Michael E. Stano and N.L.Reinsch Jr., Communication in Interviews (Englewood-Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982): Eugene J. Webb, et al., Unobtrusive Measures: Nonreactive Research in the Social Sciences (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966).

7

For hypothesis formation, see Susan R. Horton, Thinking Through Writing (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982); Herbert Leon Searles, Logic and Scientific Methods: An Introductory Course, 2nd ed. (New York: Ronald Press, Co., 1956).

8

Works of importance to procedures related to analysis include the following: Monroe C. Beardsley, Practical Logic (Englewood-Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1950); Carter V. Good and Douglas E. Scates, Methods of Research: Educational, Psychological, Sociological (New York: Appleton Century-Crofts, 1954); Claire Selltiz, Lawrence S. Wrightsman, Stuart W. Cook, Research Methods in Social Relations, 3rd ed., (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1976).